

How has the right to vote expanded since the Constitution was adopted?

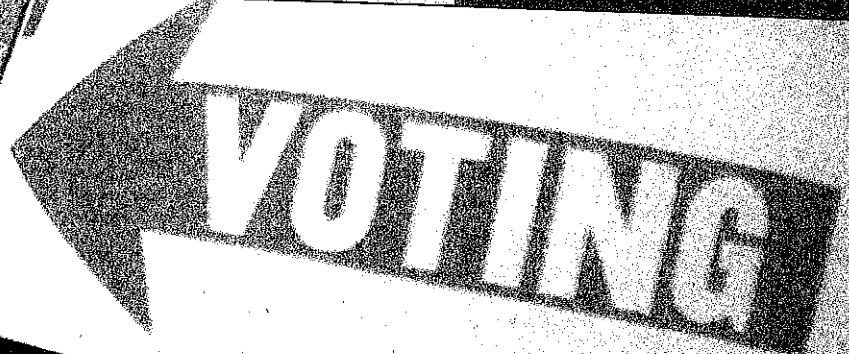
LESSON PURPOSE

The Constitution originally left it up to the state governments to decide who should have the right to vote. In the early years of our nation the states limited the right to vote to white men who owned property. In 1789 white males who did not own property, members of certain religious groups, freedmen, Native Americans, slaves, and women were not allowed to vote.

In this lesson you will learn about how the right to vote has been expanded in the last two hundred years to achieve a basic ideal of our representative democracy—the constitutional right of all adult citizens to vote.

When you finish this lesson you should be able to explain how voting rights were extended by changes in state voting laws, amendments to the Constitution, acts of Congress, and decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court.

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VOTING



TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



civil rights movement
Civil War Amendments
grandfather clause
literacy test
poll tax
register
suffrage

Voting Rights Act
Thirteenth Amendment
Fourteenth Amendment
Fifteenth Amendment
Nineteenth Amendment
Twenty-fourth Amendment
Twenty-sixth Amendment

How was the right of suffrage extended before the Civil War?

The colonial limits on who could vote did not change much during the early years of the new nation. Many colonies only allowed white men who owned property and belonged to a particular religious group to vote.

After the Revolution, an increasing number of people objected to these limits on voting rights. States began to do away with property and religious restrictions. In addition, new states joining the Union placed fewer limitations on suffrage. **Suffrage** means the right to vote. In the early 1800s, for example, six new Western states gave the vote to all adult white males.

Although the states took steps before the Civil War to extend suffrage to more people, change was not easy. For example, as late as 1842 in Rhode Island, only men with property were allowed to vote. This situation caused an armed rebellion. The rebellion failed. But the following year Rhode Island adopted a new state constitution that gave voting rights to all male citizens who paid a tax of at least one dollar a year.



What criteria should be used to determine who should be eligible to vote?

Before the Civil War, a large part of the population—including African American men and all women—still could not vote. In the remaining sections of the lesson, you will learn how these groups, Native Americans, and others gained the right to vote.

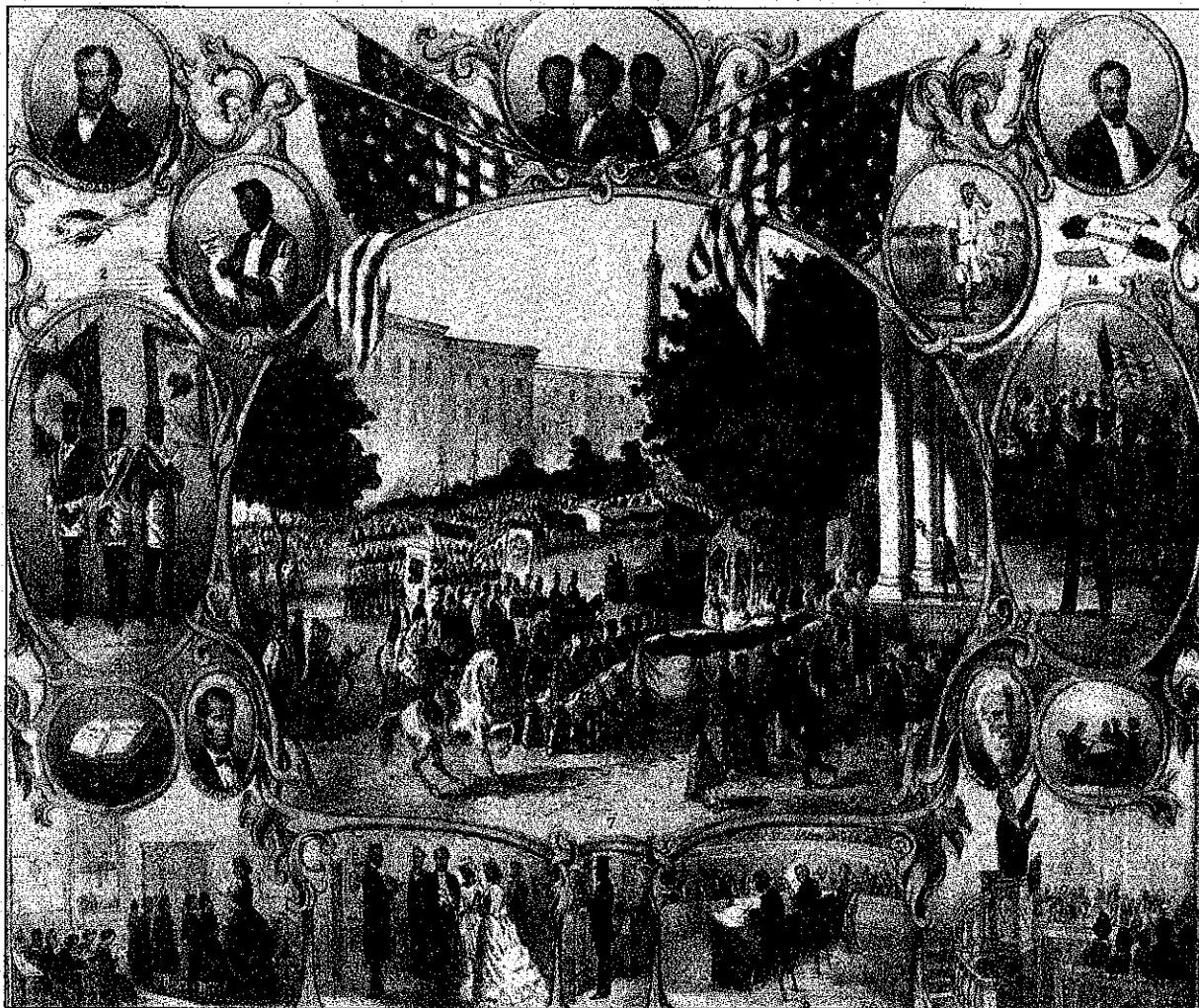
How did African American men gain the right to vote?

Although many black men fought in the Revolutionary War, the right to vote was not extended to African Americans. In 1860 only six of the thirty-four states allowed freedmen to vote.

After the Civil War, the states approved the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. These amendments are known as the **Civil War Amendments**. The **Thirteenth Amendment** abolished slavery. The **Fourteenth**

Amendment granted full citizenship to African Americans. The **Fifteenth Amendment** guaranteed the right to vote to men regardless of their "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

Adding these Civil War Amendments to the Constitution was only the start of an effort to guarantee voting rights to African Americans. Many people in the Southern states did not want black people to vote or hold public office. Some states passed laws that made it impossible for African Americans to vote. Some examples of these laws follow on the next page.



What problems were the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments intended to solve?

* Literacy tests

A **literacy test** requires that a person prove that he or she is able to read and write. Some states required all men to pass these tests before being allowed to vote. Because most African American men had been denied an education they could not pass the test. Often the people who gave the test behaved unfairly. They made it impossible for even educated African American men to pass the test.

* Grandfather clause

Some states had voting laws with wording that we call **grandfather clauses**. A grandfather clause said that a person had the right to vote only if his grandfather had had the right to vote. Few African American men could qualify. Their grandfathers had been slaves and had been denied the right to vote.

* Poll tax

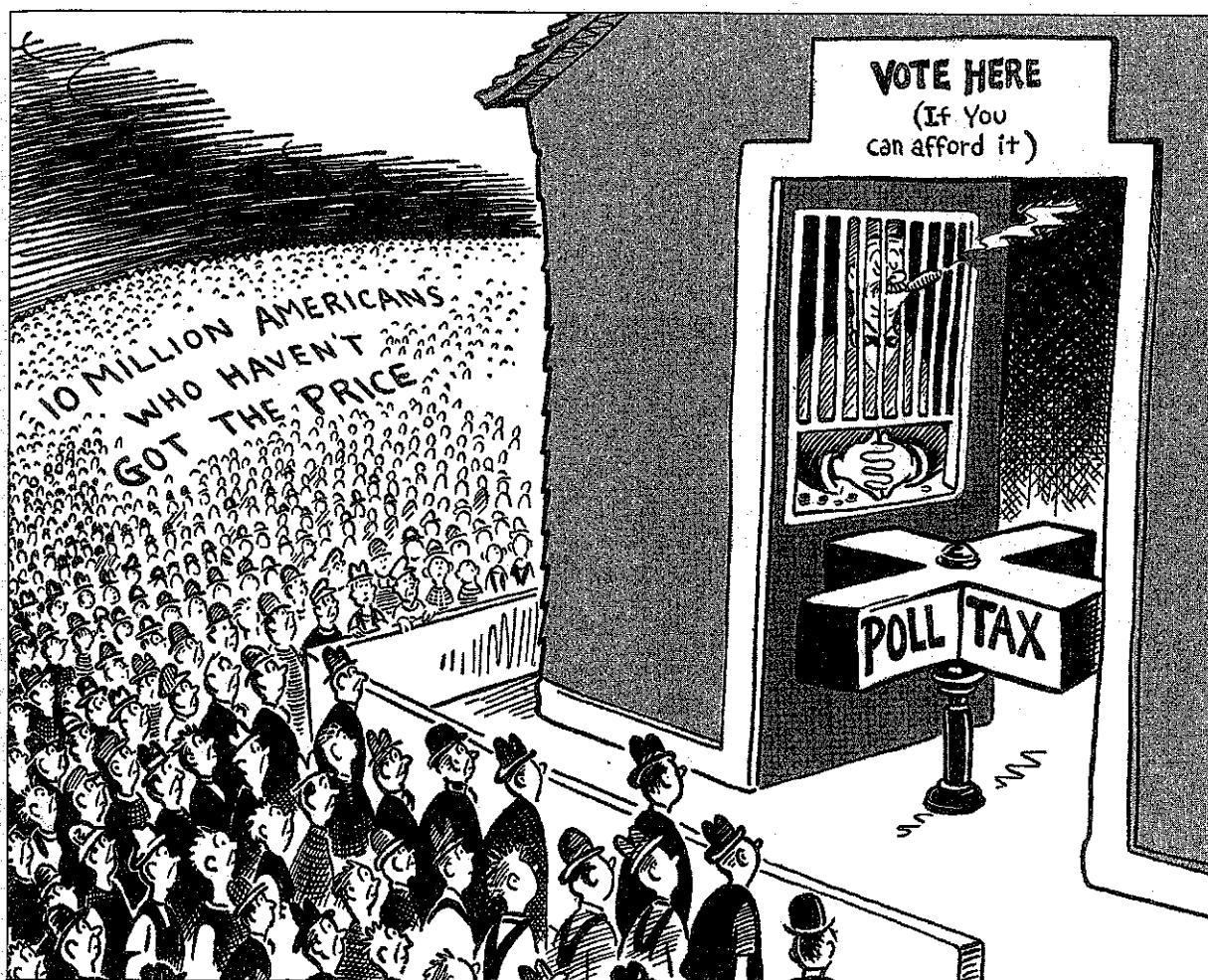
A **poll tax** is a fee that a person must pay in order to vote. Some states charged all people a poll tax. Since most former slaves were very poor, they could not afford to pay the tax and, therefore, could not vote.

People fought to get these state laws changed, but it took a long time. In 1915, the U.S. Supreme Court said that grandfather clauses were unconstitutional. Some states, however, continued to use literacy tests and poll taxes until the 1960s in order to keep African Americans from voting.

In the 1950s, more and more people began to demand that the federal government protect the right of African Americans to vote. People of all races worked together to change unfair state laws. People gave speeches and marched in the streets. These actions became known as the **civil rights movement**.



What was unfair about these voting requirements?



What was the poll tax? Why was it used?

As a result of the civil rights movement, the Twenty-fourth Amendment was added to the Constitution in 1964. The amendment says that the right to vote in national elections shall not be denied because a person fails to pay a poll tax or any other tax. The U.S. Supreme Court later said that the Twenty-fourth Amendment also applied to state elections.

Congress passed a law called the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The law protected the right to vote for all citizens. The law forced the states to obey the Constitution. It made it clear that the right to vote could not be denied because of a person's color.

How did women gain the right to vote?

In 1848, a convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, that launched a national movement by women to win the right to vote. Although suffrage for women had many supporters among men, the battle was a difficult one. In those days it was common to believe that women should not participate in government. This idea made it harder for women to achieve their goal.

In 1876, Susan B. Anthony led a delegation of women to Philadelphia to celebrate the one-hundred-year anniversary of the



Why do you think women did not gain the vote until 1920?

Declaration of Independence. While there, the women publicly protested their lack of suffrage by reading the Women's Declaration of Rights.

Gaining the right to vote for women was a long, slow process. The earliest gains were made in the western part of the country. The territory of Wyoming granted women the right to vote in 1869. By 1900, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho had followed Wyoming's lead.

It was not until 1912 that the movement to give women the right to vote gained national recognition. Presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Progressive Party supported the movement. In 1913 women were granted the right to vote in the territory of Alaska.

In 1920, the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave women the vote. One hundred and thirty years after the signing of the Constitution, women had finally gained the right to vote.

How did Native Americans gain the right to vote?

American Indians governed themselves by their own tribal laws, treaties with the United States government, and by special laws passed by Congress. These laws did not recognize American Indians to be citizens of the United States. As a result, they did not have the right to vote.

The first attempt to grant Native Americans citizenship came in 1887 when Congress passed the Dawes Act. The Dawes Act granted a tract of land and citizenship to those who were willing to give up their allegiance to their tribe. The law was strongly resented by most tribes.

Finally, Congress passed a law in 1924 called the Indian Citizenship Act. This law fully recognized Indians as citizens of the United States. The law also gave Indians the right to vote in federal elections.



President Calvin Coolidge with a group of Osage Indians after the signing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. What rights were realized by Native Americans with the passage of this law?

How did eighteen-year-olds gain the right to vote?

In the 1960s and 1970s, the government drafted thousands of young men to fight in the Vietnam War. Many of these young men were too young to vote. They did not have a voice in the elections for government officials responsible for deciding America's role in that war. The voting requirement at that time was twenty-one years of age.

Congress passed a law in 1970 lowering the voting age to eighteen. The U.S. Supreme Court then ruled that Congress could only regulate federal elections. At that time, only four states allowed eighteen-



Why should people who are old enough to serve in the armed forces also have the right to vote?



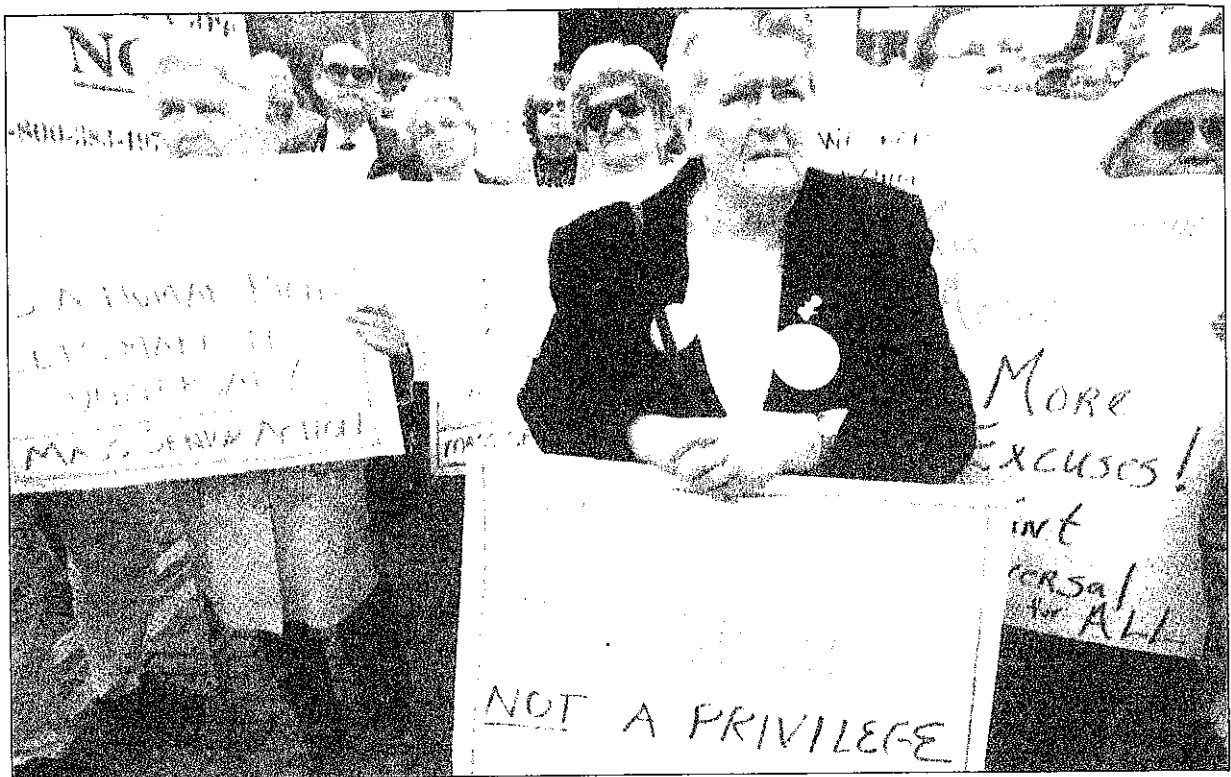
What is the relationship between who is allowed to vote and how democratic a country is?

year-olds to vote. Following the Court's decision, steps were taken to amend the Constitution so that suffrage would be extended to eighteen-year-olds in both state and federal elections.

In 1971, the **Twenty-sixth Amendment** was added to the Constitution. The amendment grants the right to vote to any citizen who is eighteen years of age or older.

What are voting requirements today?

The states, although limited by the Constitution and the federal Voting Rights Act, still make some decisions regarding voting rights. All states have laws saying only citizens have the right to vote, although the Constitution does not require this. Every state requires that persons must live in the state for a period of time before they can vote, and all states except North Dakota require citizens to register



Why do you suppose older Americans vote more frequently than younger Americans?

before voting. To register to vote means to have your name added to a list. Voters are required to register to ensure that they are qualified to vote and to keep people from voting more than once.

Throughout our history we have used our Constitution to achieve nearly universal adult suffrage. Today, almost every American of voting age has the right to vote. This has made the United States one of the most democratic nations on earth. Americans can use the power of the ballot box to choose more public officials at more levels of government than can voters in any other democracy.

As the right to vote has expanded, though, the willingness of American citizens to participate has decreased. In recent years there has been a steady decline in voter turnout for elections.

The United States now ranks eleventh among the world's democracies in the percentage of eligible voters who exercise the right to vote.

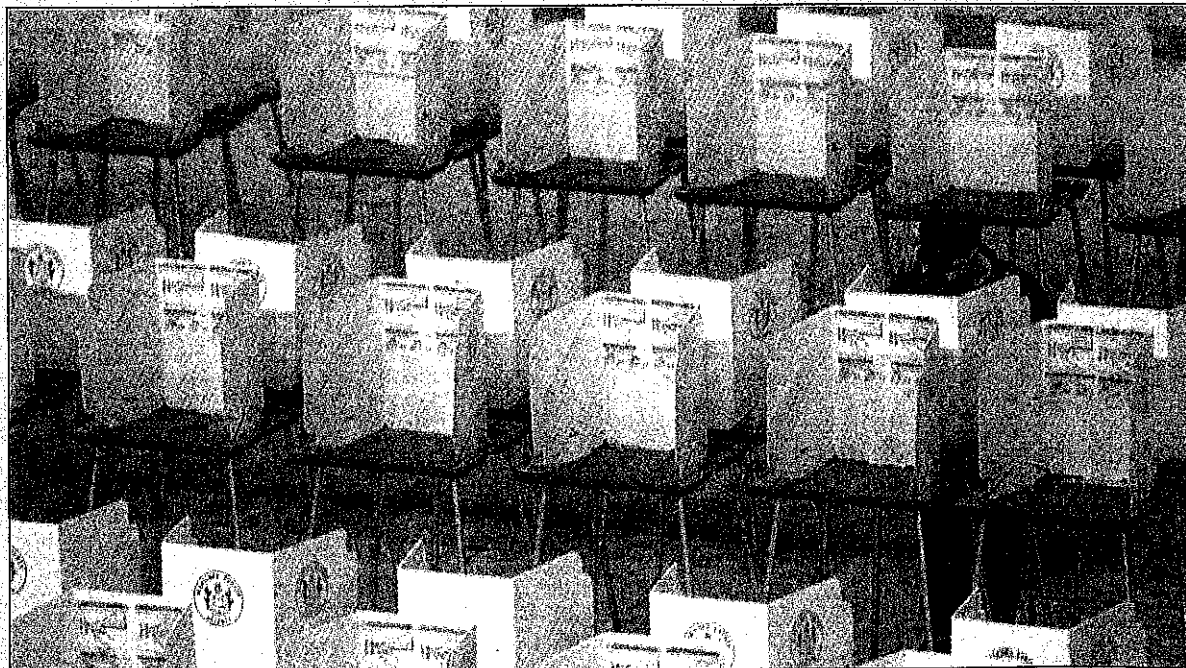
Many people worry about the unwillingness of so many Americans to use this most fundamental right and duty of citizenship. They fear that not voting may reflect a growing feeling of being disconnected from government. However, if the United States is to be a country that is truly of, by, and for the people, it is essential that the people exercise their right to vote competently and responsibly. Responsible voting is essential to democracy.

What suggestions do you have for increasing participation in elections today?

Generally, better-off and better-educated citizens use their right to vote to a much greater extent than do poor or uneducated citizens. Voter turnout is also related to age. Older Americans are almost twice as likely to vote than are young Americans.

Work in groups of three to five to discuss the following questions. Share your opinions with the class.

- ① Why do you think that older Americans might be more interested in government policies than younger Americans?
- ② What political issues motivate younger citizens to get involved with public life? Give examples.
- ③ Some countries increased voter participation by holding elections on Sundays. What other methods can you suggest to increase voter turnout?
- ④ In some countries voter participation is mandatory. What effect might this have on elections? Do you think this is a good way to increase citizen participation in elections?



Do you think something should be done to increase voter turnout? Why or why not?

LESSON REVIEW

- ❶ What were some of the restrictions on voting rights that kept various groups of people from voting?
- ❷ Explain how each of the following groups of people gained the right to vote.
 - African Americans
 - eighteen-year-olds
 - Native Americans
 - women
- ❸ What amendments were added to the Constitution so that more people would have the right to vote?
- ❹ What laws did Congress pass to protect the constitutional right of citizens to vote?
- ❺ What actions did citizens take to expand the right to vote to most Americans?

ACTIVITIES

- ❶ With help from your teacher, invite someone from the League of Women Voters to come to your class to discuss elections in your state. Prepare questions to ask your guest during the visit.
- ❷ Use the Internet to find information about the requirements for voting in your state. Obtain a copy of a voter registration form and a sample ballot from a recent election. Your community library, county clerk, or registrar's office should be able to help you. Share the information you find with your class.
- ❸ Follow a political campaign in your community or state. Learn about the candidates. Keep articles from the newspaper. Keep a journal where you record your impression about the election process.
- ❹ Write a story that shows how one person's vote can determine the outcome of an election. Share your story with the class.